



WORLD'S MOST TRAVELED MAN?

AFTER LOGGING 2.3 MILLION MILES AND JOURNEYING TO 95 PERCENT OF THE EARTH'S PLACES, THIS TYSONS EXECUTIVE MAY BE THE PLANET'S BIGGEST GLOBETROTTER. SO WHY IS HE CONTROVERSIAL?

BY ELIOT STEIN

If the name Bouvet Island doesn't ring a bell, it shouldn't. Lying between Queen Maud Land in Antarctica and the Cape of Good Hope, it's the most remote place on Earth—an uninhabited volcanic island half the size of Assateague. Glaciers cover more than 90 percent of Bouvet; the rest is a mixture of frozen craters, impenetrable cliffs, and basalt scraped raw by screaming gales.

Its utter isolation makes it the kind of place where you could explode a nuclear bomb without anyone hearing it—which someone did in 1979, as flashing lights detected by an American satellite revealed. But for Charles Veley, an executive for a Tysons Corner software company, Bouvet was the ultimate holiday destination.

Veley's interest wasn't a result of mere curiosity. By 2003, at age 37, he had traveled to 249 of the world's countries and territories as defined by Guinness World Records—more than anyone else who has ever lived, according to his estimates. Yet when he approached Guinness to claim the title of world's most traveled man, officials told him that to be recognized in its books, he'd have to set foot on one of the two places that the previous record holder, John Clouse—a trial lawyer who had been married seven times and traveled with holes in his socks—had never been: Bouvet. The only problem was how to get there.

There's a reason fewer than 100 people have been to Bouvet. The nearest inhabited

island, Tristan da Cunha (population 261), is 1,000 miles away, and ships heading to Antarctic scientific bases need to veer days off course to reach it. But when a Russian contact tipped Veley off that South Africa's National Antarctic Programme was scheduled to dispatch a support ship to Bouvet to fix a weather system, he booked a flight to Cape Town and paid to hop aboard the ship.

During the voyage, Veley spent 72 days huddled next to a team of hardy sailors and military personnel who in all likelihood would rather have stayed home. When the vessel came as close as it could to Bouvet's craggy coast, it was left to a helicopter operated by South African Air Force pilots to attempt the dangerous landing. Clouse had gotten this close to Bouvet twice before, but each time weather conditions had forced him to turn back. This time, as the aircraft left the boat, it struggled through freezing temperatures, dense fog, and nearly 50-knot winds. Swirling gusts dragged the chopper off course before it touched down on Bouvet's frozen rocks. Having reached what he called the

PHOTOGRAPH BY DOUGLAS SONDERS

“holy grail,” Veley stepped out, snapped some pictures, and headed home a few hours later.

He had made it to the end of the world and completed his “lifelong quest.” Or so he thought.

NOW 47, CHARLES VELEY IS AN EXTREME example of one of the world’s most extreme groups: competitive travelers. Fueled by money, time, and compulsion, competitive travelers dedicate their lives to going, literally, everywhere. Often called “country collectors” or “tickers,” they accumulate countries the way some collect baseball cards, and they travel to such places as Aargau and Zug and everywhere in between. They’ve carved the world into a jigsaw of must-see provinces, territories, and atolls. What drives them is somewhat paradoxical: They’re on a quest to “know” the world, and to keep score while doing it.

Says Veley: “There are people who aspire to see everything and those who are actually able to do it.”

His parents didn’t have the money or interest to travel. They sometimes found baby Charles crawling out the door of their Brooklyn apartment. When he was old enough, he started studying maps, planning imaginary trips on the family atlas, and wondering why his stamp collection represented different colonies with images of the same king. Yet by the time he was 18, Veley had left the US only once.

He got a scholarship to Harvard from the Air Force in 1983. When he wasn’t crunching numbers as a computer-science major, he was pulling T-37 jets out of corkscrew dives as a fighter pilot. Veley took a break from his undergraduate flight training for a semester in Australia, where he learned far more outside the classroom than in it.

“I never registered for class,” he says. “Instead, I discovered you could easily go to places like Tahiti, New Zealand, and Fiji. I was hooked.”

Shortly after Veley graduated, a doctor discovered a tiny scar over his retina, leading the Air Force to discharge him. A few months later, he bought a Eurail Pass and crisscrossed “every inch of Western Europe.”

When he returned to the States in 1991, he and a few friends founded MicroStrategy, a software company in Tysons. At the height of the dot-com boom, the company was valued at \$24 billion. Tired of 80-hour workweeks, Veley retired in 1999 at age 34—MicroStrategy’s stock had risen from \$7 a share to \$110—and sold some of his shares to travel full-time with his wife, Kimberly.

One night in 2001, while flying 30,000 feet above the Pacific Ocean, he picked up an in-flight magazine and learned about the Travelers Century Club. At that moment, his wanderlust turned into a competition.

THE TRAVELERS’ CENTURY CLUB (TCC) IS an organization for international jet-setters. Its members—including a chapter in DC—have spent a lot of time and money hopping across the globe to visit the 100 countries needed to gain admission. Not surprisingly, most of its 2,000 worldwide members are wealthy retirees. Having been to 60 countries at that point, Veley embarked on a systematic tour of the planet with the same vigor and spreadsheet mentality that had made him a multimillionaire.

“Being a software guy, travel solutions come easy,” he says. “It’s just logistics.”

During the next three years, Veley spent nearly \$2 million and traveled to every country he hadn’t visited. After traveling with him for almost two years, his wife backed out to

give birth to their first child, but Veley wasn’t done. In 2002, he says, he traveled “259,649 miles, or more than ten times around the world, including more than two months at sea, and 254 flight segments on 94 airlines.” In 2003, he became the youngest person to visit the world’s 320 countries and provinces as recognized by the TCC.

To date, Veley has traveled 2.3 million miles, taken 5,100 flights, been to 325 UNESCO World Heritage Sites, and learned five languages—though he can order beer in many more.

“People who collect things want to complete the set—be it baseball cards, stamps, or countries,” he says. “I’m no different.”

Veley is living out a fantasy that millions of travelers can only dream of. From Navassa to Nunavut, he has collected the kind of stories that call to mind Dos Equis’s “most interesting man in the world” commercials.

He once sped through Islamabad on the Karakorum Highway and later briefed the CIA on the Taliban. In Russia, he was interrogated by the KGB for four hours on suspicion of aiding Chechen rebels. He fended off sharks while diving in the Pacific near Baker Island. And he nearly froze to death 400 miles off the coast of Antarctica when a storm closed in during a five-week ham-radio expedition, forcing him and a group of Chilean workers to huddle together for 24 hours while waiting for a helicopter.

He says travel has taught him the importance of being ready to throw your plans out the window, such as when you’re in Kiribati awaiting a skipper for a 1,000-mile voyage, only to have him show up three days late and drunk.

Veley says every place has been worth seeing, even when it meant jumping off a ship to swim through ten-meter swells



At the South Pole on a minus-30-degree day.



Veley with a group of ascetics in Nepal.



A bullet-ridden welcome-to-Chechnya sign.

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF CHARLES VELEY



Veley with two Mursi women in Ethiopia.

In the middle of a Siberian forest.



toward Rockall—a speck of an island off the coast of Scotland—to touch its slick surface and raise his arms in triumph before being swept out to sea.

“The more you travel, the more regional perspective you get,” he says. “It helps you relate to different types of people, and the world becomes more beautiful because of it. It helps you understand the chaos.”

To a certain extent, Veley is right. A country collector is probably much better than the average person at hopping into a taxicab, studying the driver, and trying to name where he’s from—as Veley likes to do. But when you put a premium on exotic destinations that only a handful of humans have experienced, it can be hard to relate to those who don’t share your passion. If you spend your life going to places like Oeucussi and Voronezh Oblast, does that bring you closer to knowing the world or take you farther from reality?

“The thing to remember about competitive travel is that you’re dealing with a lot of wackos,” says Lee Abbamonte of New York City, the youngest American to visit every country and who, at 34, is on a mission to overtake Veley as the youngest traveler to

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PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF CHARLES VELEY



visit every TCC destination. “That’s not to say Charles is one of them—he’s a nice guy—but if you go down the list of the top travelers, there are a lot of strange people and divorcés with tons of time, money, and not much else.”

ONE OF THE FEW PLACES VELEY HASN’T been, ironically, is Guinness World Records.

Not long after returning from Bouvet, he went to Guinness’s offices in London with his passports, photos, and evidence for inclusion in its 2005 record book. Soon thereafter, the chairman of the TCC wrote letters of protest to Guinness stating that because it operates on the honor system, it would be impossible to certify Veley’s claims. Guinness concluded that it could no longer agree on an objective standard for the title of most traveled man and eliminated the category.

The first problem with trying to quantify one’s travels is determining how to dissect the globe. You could go by the International Organization for Standardization’s list of 163 countries. But what about the United Nation’s list of 193 recognized territories, The TCC’s 320 destinations, or the American Radio Relay League’s list of 340 places?

You can also argue that a trip to Guam shouldn’t count the same as one to Kansas. Then comes the question of what constitutes a visit. Is it enough to step across the border, or do you have to eat a meal there? Spend the night? It’s a debate country collectors could have from here to Karakalpakstan.

Seeking the validation he couldn’t get from Guinness, in 2005 Veley created Most Traveled People, a website that combines four preexisting destination lists and allows users to carve the world into further territories by voting. To get credit for visiting a place, users submit one of several forms of proof, such as a passport stamp, an airline ticket, a credit-card receipt, or a photo. Each month, members get ranked on a scorecard.

Currently, MTP’s 12,204 registered users have divided the world into 873 “countries, territories, autonomous regions, enclaves, geographically separated island groups, and major states and provinces.” Veley has been to 829 MTP locations—or 95 percent of the world—giving him the title of most traveled human, at least by his rules.

“Most Traveled People’s goal is to be the official system of record of serious travelers,” he says. “The phrase ‘most traveled’ means geographic coverage of the land on Earth. There is no further subjective criterion.”

In the past several years, Veley has been

Charles Veley’s Travel Tips

Always in his pocket: A smartphone.

Best way to avoid jet lag: Travel westward.

How to get bumped to first class: Dress well, be polite, and compliment the person at the check-in counter.

Best way to get out of an airport quickly: Have a ride waiting for you and never check a bag.

Best way to experience a place as a local does: Leave necessary items at home and buy them in a market.

Biggest mistake most travelers make: Overpacking and overplanning.

How to pack a suitcase: “Put shoes on the bottom first, toe to heel, then lay socks and underwear to fill the space. On top of those, lay pants and, if you’re bringing one, your suit. Shirts go on top because if you jam them in the middle, they’ll get more wrinkled.”

the subject of dozens of TV and newspaper stories, some of which handed him the crown of most traveled person without asking too many questions. But as the media spotlight has intensified, so have the rumblings of competitive travelers.

“There are a lot of questions out there,” says Lew Toulmin, a Silver Spring resident and author of the book *The Most Traveled Man on Earth*. With 288 countries under his belt, Toulmin is the 360th-most traveled person on the MTP rankings. “Do you use frequent-flier miles to quantify most traveled or miles walked or something else? Most people just say number of countries, but even that’s questionable. I’d say Charles certainly has as good a shot at the title as anyone.”

One person who disagrees is Jeff Shea, owner of a manufacturing company in California who believes he has seen more of the world. Not only has Shea been to every country; he’s also climbed the highest peak on each continent, walked 590 miles across the Altiplano in Chile and Argentina, and been part of an expedition that discovered a group of islands off the coast of Greenland in 2006.

In response to Veley’s MTP site, Shea created his own far more extensive list: Shea’s Register of the World, which consists of 3,978 countries and “sub-national provinces”—meaning that those wishing to tick

Azerbaijan off their list can’t just rent a car from Turkey and dip across the border but have to set foot in each of its 78 geographically distinct regions. Still, Shea admits his method isn’t perfect.

“There’s no real way to quantify who is the world’s most traveled person, but no, I don’t think it’s Charles,” Shea says. “Charles is the most traveled person according to his criteria, and I’m the most traveled person according to other people’s criteria. There is too much disagreement within the pack, and the fact is that the people who are involved have a lot of self-interest.”

VELEY’S MAIN COMPETITORS WILL TELL you how much they admire his drive, but they also say that anyone who claims to have traveled to every country in a few years isn’t stopping to see much.

In his book, *Meetings With Remarkable Travelers*, MTP’s tenth-ranked traveler, Jorge Sánchez of Spain, has a chapter called “Meeting With Charles Veley: The Speed of Light Traveler.” In it, he talks about befriending Veley and inviting him to his home before they both illegally entered the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic. Sánchez—who has worked as a dishwasher and collected fruit in different countries to pay for his travels and has been jailed in five countries for illegal border crossing—recalls that when Veley met with Guinness’s last record holder, John Clouse, to tell him he had made it to Bouvet and bested his record, Clouse refused to recognize Veley’s accomplishments, claiming his rival was “traveling too quickly through the countries like a ping-pong ball.”

While in the Sahara together, Sánchez writes, Veley admitted to having traveled at a breakneck pace because “being declared most traveled man would help him serve as an expert in international affairs.” When Sánchez asked Veley what he thought of one of the Solomon Islands he claimed to have visited, he reports that Veley replied: “I don’t know. I didn’t visit Nendo, only its airport.”

Traveling like Veley, Sánchez concludes, “is like buying a ticket to the cinema, and going back home without watching the movie.”

Lee Abbamonte, who is currently number 16 on the MTP list—but who says he has “no interest in wasting my time and money visiting random rocks or icebergs in the middle of the ocean”—says: “I really like Charles as a person, but I disagree that he is the most traveled man in the world. The fact that he only goes to airports and

then takes off again—does that count? That's what ticks a lot of people off about what he's done. When I bring that up with him, he just says that he had a goal and he wanted to achieve it, but is that really achieving anything?"

Veley is only 44 ticks shy of completing his goal to go "everywhere," but these days his world tour is more or less grounded. Short of funds due to a combination of his years on the road, the stock-market collapse, and his recent divorce, he has returned to MicroStrategy and 80-hour workweeks. When not flying to Washington to work 100 days a year here, Veley spends every other weekend at home in San Francisco with his three young children. At the peak of his competitive travel, Veley was sometimes away for as long as three months at a time—often seeing his kids only on computer screens.

At the end of May, he's hoping to squeeze in a trip that's been years in the making: After lobbying foreign officials and US senators, Veley, Shea, Abbamonte, and a team of other competitive travelers are set to embark on an expedition to the long-disputed

Charles Veley's Most Memorable Places

Most beautiful place: Lord Howe Island in the Pacific Ocean near Australia.

Most beautiful landmark: Eiffel Tower.

Least inspiring place: Turkmenistan.

Strangest places: Las Vegas and Ascension Island (South Atlantic Ocean).

Most interesting place: India.

Most similar place to Washington: Paris.

Ideal retirement spot: North shore of Kauai, Hawaii.

Favorite travel websites: Lonely Planet, TripAdvisor, Google Maps.

Best resource for finding round-the-world tickets: AirTreks.com.

Favorite domestic airline: Virgin America.

Friendliest people: Fijians.

Least friendly people: Residents of Nakhichevan, Azerbaijan.

Shortest time spent in a location: Five seconds, on the uninhabited island of Rockall in the North Atlantic Ocean.

Paracel Islands—a constellation of sandbars off the South China Sea that has been closed to foreigners. Aside from Bouvet Island, Paracel is the only Guinness destination John Clouse never reached, which would make Veley the first person to complete the entire list.

"It has special meaning to me personally, as a milestone, but I'd never approach Guinness again at this point," Veley says. "I have more important things to worry about."

After going to the ends of the earth to become the most traveled man, he now claims that recognition is no longer important to him. While his lifelong quest was once to make it into Guinness, Veley now says his goal is "to enjoy life as much as I can and to provide for and be a good model for my children."

It's possible that after almost a decade on the road, the world's most traveled man has finally found the perspective he's been looking for. **W**

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